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ABSTRACT

Noting that negligence and maltreatment of children is a phenomenon that hinders child development and causes damage to society, this paper deals with segments of parent-child relationships within the complex context of children and youth in a society of risks. The paper reviews recent studies pointing to the importance of certain sociological, psychological, medical, and educational facts as well as economic conditions posing risk. Particularly highlighted is a study conducted with pupils attending elementary schools in Rijeka, Slovenia, that reveals the complexity of the problem, which is magnified by parents' lack of control of children as one form of child negligence. The paper derives from the studies reviewed a model or hierarchy of problems constituting risk of negligence which tend to accumulate, including: inadequate relationships of parents toward children, punishment in families, children's fear of parents, children's fear of school, poor performance in school, younger parents, and addictions in the family. The model also spells out additional risk factors posed by a society indifferent to family risks, and ameliorating factors in a society providing help, protection, and better advancement. (Contains 11 references.) (HTH)

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RISKY FAMILIES AND NEGLECTED CHILDREN
A Personal and Social Problem

ED 479 406

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with segments of parent-child relationships within the context of the complex phenomenon of children and youth in a society of risks. Recent studies point at the importance of certain sociological, psychological, medical and educational facts as well as economic conditions. The presented research findings, conducted on pupils attending elementary schools in Rijeka, reveal the complexity of the problem which is magnified by the phenomenon of the lack of control of children, as one of the forms of child negligence. The hierarchy of the problems, obtained through research, are as follows: inadequate relationships of parents towards children, punishment in families, fear of parents, fear of school, poor performance in school, etc.

Negligence and maltreatment of children is a phenomenon that, through its inhuman and unethical acts, hinders child development and causes great damage to society as a whole. Child neglect and abuse or cruel and inhuman treatment of children, that sometimes ends fatally, most often is the result of the interaction of various risk factors. Although child abuse and neglect is hardly a novelty of the modern world, this phenomenon, according to various researches, is becoming more and more a common occurrence. In support of this are the millions of incidents of neglected and maltreated children that are registered in some countries of the world (Cicchetti, 1997; Gaudin, 1993, and others). The latest research findings indicate that there is a tendency towards an increase in the number of incidents of abused and neglected children and they foresee a 10 % increase per year up until the year 2002 (Geen, Tumblin, 1999), while the dark figures conceal many horrendous fates of children (60 - 70 %, NIS 3; Sedlak, 1996).

If we consider child rearing to be a 'transgenerational' process, then children from risky families tend to gather into different groups of children at risk. During the last two decades, theories on the risky behavior phenomenon have been reconceptualized. Modern studies on 'risky children' are developing theories which talk about the 'life orientation of these children' and about the progression of various behaviors with respect to the mutual identification which occurs between peers or adults (Sedlak, 1996, Moffitt, 1993).

In view of etiology, it is sometimes almost impossible to clearly distinguish the difference between negligence and maltreatment of children and this makes that problem even more serious. It is often thought that the maltreatment of children is limited only to physical injuries, but the term abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) also includes neglect (physical, emotional, educational) (NNCHAN, 1996). In the majority of research studies that deal with maltreatment and other risky behaviors of adults and parents, namely the caretakers, are identified as the perpetrators of neglect and abuse. The definition that was incorporated in the US legislation defines a neglected and abused child as a person who is under 18 and who lacks the care of parents or other responsible caretakers. This definition also includes the lack of providing appropriate nutrition, education, healthcare, encouragement, tolerance, as well as any other requirements needed for the well-being of the child (Iwaniec, 1996).

Considering everything thus far said, it is obvious that the obligations set in the Declaration as well as international agreements on the rights of children are not being met.

THE RISKY FAMILY - THE MULTIDIRECTIONAL PROCESS

According to LeVine, the universal goals of parenthood are arranged in a hierarchy. Their goal is to create an environment that will promote a healthy development of their children. At the top of the hierarchy is the child's physical health which implicitly encompasses the normal physical, mental, sexual and behavioral development of the child

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who needs all of this in order to be able to survive in this economically based society and advance throughout his/her adulthood. Parental goals also includes the child's normal behavioral development in order to maximize the cultural values: morality, prestige, wealth, religious behavior, intellectual achievements, personal happiness, self-esteem, which are all postulated and symbolically elaborated in culturally distinctive beliefs, norms and ideologies (Vasta, 1992). The universal goals have been arranged in strict order.

Numerous studies point out the complex problems that maltreated children are faced with and explain that the source of this problem are the parents' unfulfilled goals. Followers of the traditional approach believe that children are at risk of being maltreated and abused in families of low socio-economic status as well as in 'incomplete' families (families composed of only one parent). Failure of parents to fulfil their main goals occurs in a complex multidirectional process. Unemployment, social crises and other economic and social setbacks adversely afflict the family's existence. Stressful and frustrating situations caused by the struggle to survive place these families in risk groups. Children living in families lacking cohesion, where no help, support or encouragement is offered, where there are serious conflicts among the members of the household, where parents are prone to punishment as a method of establishing discipline, where there is social maladaptation, are all at risk of experiencing maltreatment and abuse. Research findings (P. Libby and R. Bybee, 1979) show that 52 % of the victims suffered neglect and abuse due to the poor functioning of the family, while the remaining 48 % were caused by parents suffering behavioral and psychopathic disorders.

Modern concepts examining this issue emphasize that the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect stem from various sources. In this paper, the author used a synthetic-analytical approach to show a model of various risk factors found in families that lead to child abuse and neglect (Scheme 1).

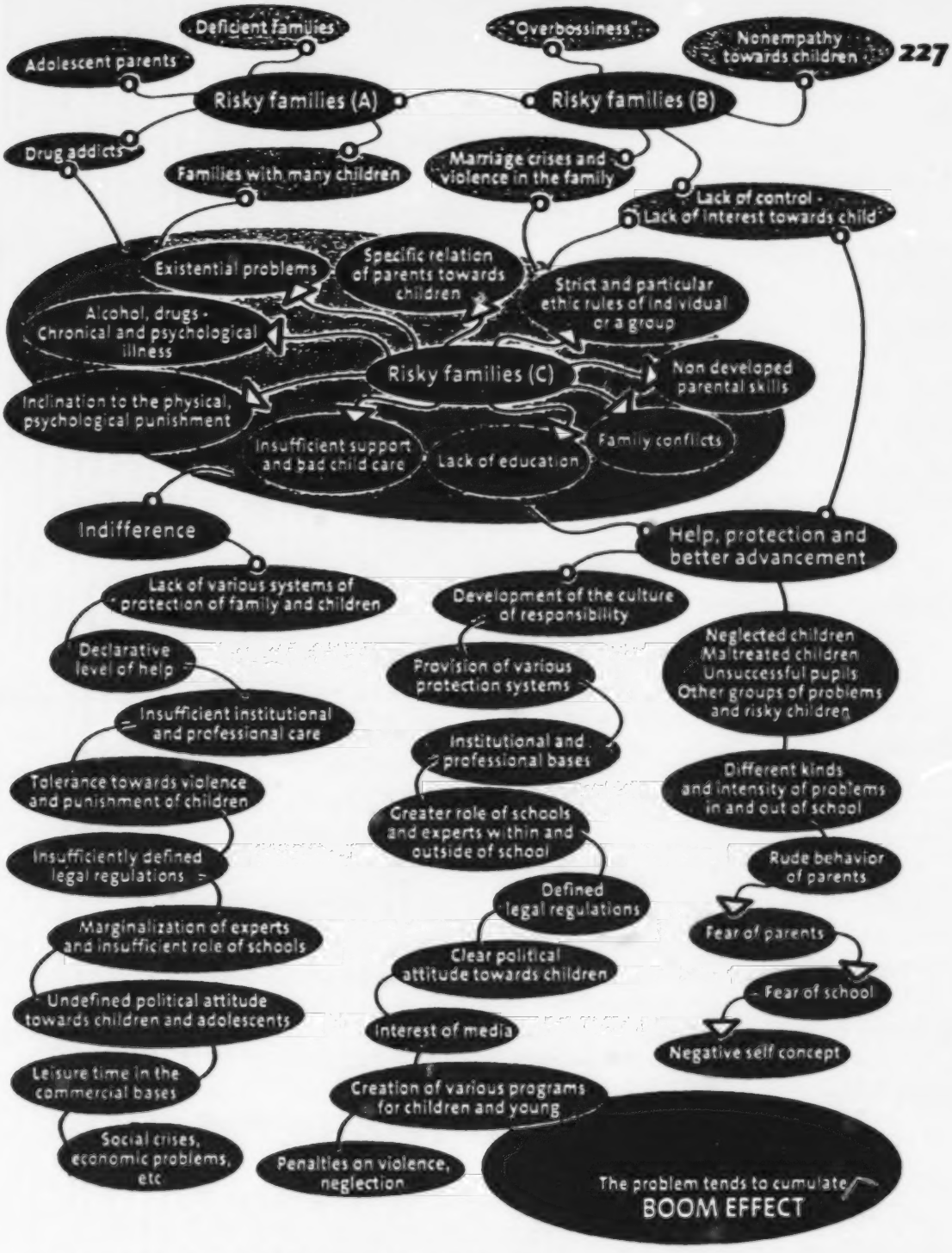
Establishing cause-effect relationships in this case is almost impossible, however some important risk factors have been established. The more risk factors that are found in the interactions, the greater the variety of risky family structures (Scheme 1, Pictures A, B, C). In these families, children are often abused and maltreated in some other forms and they are daily exposed to many risks that lurk for them either in their homes or in the surrounding environment. The maltreatment of children is the result of adverse social, economic, cultural, educational, health, psychological and other negative conditions existing in a society. These are unfavorable conditions for child rearing and child development. The problems the neglected children are faced with are not necessarily biological in nature but they are rather of social, pedagogical or psychological nature. Neglected and abused children often voice their problems by failing in school, dropping out of school, behaving aggressively and antisocially, by being self-destructive or by harassing other people, or destroying other people's property. Some current studies show that 50 % of the school population show functioning problems (disorders) caused by parents' negligence (www.cwu.edu/chams/socialr.html).

Despite some families' tendency to transfer their child-rearing role to schools or some other institutions, the family's indifference towards the children as well as their lack of supervision are just some of the various types of maltreatment. This is a phenomenon that is more and more present in today's 'contemporary' society. Many years of observing pupils who are faced with these problems leads to the conclusion that the source of the problem is the family.

Research conducted on pupils attending elementary schools in Rijeka leads to the conclusion that negligence is a complex problem and that the lack of parental control generates many other undesirable problems (Scheme 2) (Zloković, 1999).

Certain elements have been established during research which led to the conclusion that insufficient parental control of children pertaining to the lower socio-economic class is not the factor which could explain this occurrence (0.26 $p < 0.1$) as is the case in economically deprived families (0.17). In contrast to this, a good child-parent relationship is the most important factor (0.92). These findings, however, can point to the existence of some problems such as: child rearing styles, the interaction of parents with their children, negative attitudes of parents towards their children that result in a lack of interest or a lack of parental control. Poor relationships between the child and the parents, plenty of negative attitudes towards the children, traditional types of physical punishment - the universal relationship between the parents and the children (0.63) become risk factors which further on complicate the problem.

Survey results point at the disturbing occurrence of the children's fear of parents phenomenon (0.56 $p < 0.1$) in families in which parents show hostile, indifferent or nagging behaviors toward their children. Children fear parents for various reasons. The fear of parents' symptoms conjointly with some other, previously established,


Deficient families
Adolescent parents
Risky families (A)
Drug addicts
Families with many children
"Overbossiness"
Nonempathy towards children
Risky families (B)
Marriage crises and violence in the family
Lack of control - Lack of interest towards child
Existential problems
Specific relation of parents towards children
Strict and particular ethic rules of individual or a group
Alcohol, drugs - Chronical and psychological illness
Risky families (C)
Non developed parental skills
Inclination to the physical, psychological punishment
Insufficient support and bad child care
Lack of education
Family conflicts
Indifference
Help, protection and better advancement
Lack of various systems of protection of family and children
Development of the culture of responsibility
Declarative level of help
Provision of various protection systems
Neglected children
Maltreated children
Unsuccessful pupils
Other groups of problems and risky children
Insufficient institutional and professional care
Institutional and professional bases
Tolerance towards violence and punishment of children
Greater role of schools and experts within and outside of school
Different kinds and intensity of problems in and out of school
Insufficiently defined legal regulations
Rude behavior of parents
Defined legal regulations
Marginalization of experts and insufficient role of schools
Fear of parents
Clear political attitude towards children
Undefined political attitude towards children and adolescents
Fear of school
Interest of media
Negative self concept
Leisure time in the commercial bases
Creation of various programs for children and young
Social crises, economic problems, etc
Penalties on violence, neglection
The problem tends to cumulate
BOOM EFFECT

Scheme 1: A model of risky families and children at risk of violent treatment.

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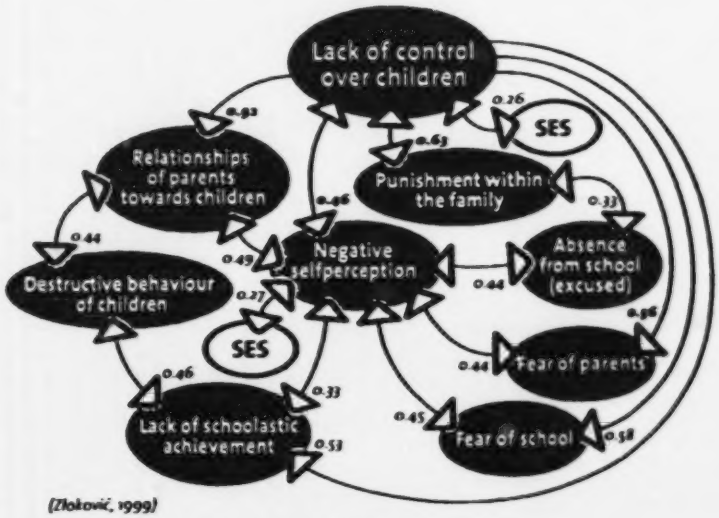
interactive risky relation occurrences, contribute to the cumulation of problems of some pupils at school and in turn trigger off an "explosion" - the "boom effect". Sometimes these "boom effect" incidents can be very dangerous. In cases where the parents' attitude towards their children is inappropriate, the fear of parents is not the only serious problem these children are faced with. They develop almost identical feelings towards the school and the teachers (0.58). This places these children in high-risk groups. Namely, pupils for whom parents show no interest, in addition to having a negative self-perception (0.46); failing at school (0.53); and some other negative occurrences, show some forms of destructive behavior (0.46).

In view of the mentioned problems, it is difficult to determine how much the problem of skipping classes, for which there is an "excuse note", is a result of real illness, the cruel behavior of parents or the child's manipulation of adults. Without entering into a number of possible explanations, there is no doubt that a large number of children - who lack adequate help and support from their parents; who pass through school unnoticed; who are alone with their problems; who are unsuccessful, unhappy and isolated; who fear their parents and teachers - are slowly but almost certainly with every new day approaching the fringes of society.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE RISK SOCIETY

Neglected, maltreated and abused children, who because of their problems show aggressive and destructive behavior, are too often criticized and labeled, without previously consideration of the fact that adults robbed them of their natural right to develop and grow. In view of the large number of maltreated, neglected and abused children in the world, even in the so-called civilized societies, it seems that these are the issues which we will have to address more intensely on the national as well as an international level. If the tendency of growth continues at the present rate, this problem will no doubt present a big problem to the society. Risky families represent a complex social problem in which the child's environment plays an important role and has dual significance - in promoting the culture of responsibility and in securing the well-being of all its members. When these requirements are not met, the environment in which the child lives poses a threat and it can contribute to the rise of various types of risk phenomena, negligence included. Many studies which deal with these phenomena point to consequences of such a large scale that they become fatal to all societies of the world.

The European integration will most probably not promote the decrease of the number of children and youth at risk, but it can certainly help secure the rights of minors on national and international levels. We emphasize certain aspects we believe are important in decreasing the risks for children and youth. Primarily these include the needs for: adopting a clear course of action or policy towards children and youth; providing various protection, assistance and aid programs, services, agencies and measures; providing legal regulations and appropriate penalties and sanctions against perpetrators of child abuse and neglect;



(Zloković, 1999)

Scheme 2: Lack of parental control and the interaction of risk factors.

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creating various educational and recreational activity programs designed for children and youth; enabling the use of non-commercial programs during spare time. Acknowledging the fact that children spend a lot of time at school, we believe that by strengthening the role of the school and by providing a team of experts and expert advice, we can offer a safe haven and sometimes the 'only hope' to many neglected, maltreated and abused children. Investing in education, on a national and international level, should take precedence over other problems that should be addressed within the European community. Even before 1990, the World Declaration dedicated to children (UNICEF), as special measures for the survival, protection and development of children, outlined the following: 'Investing in basic education must be a priority, on a national level as well as in international cooperation ...' (article 21).

Besides 'strengthening the role of the school in the lives of children and youth', and especially in view of the fact that the transferrence of the child rearing function from the family to the school is a frequent occurrence, we believe that internationally accorded standards on the 'adequate care of children' are important in decreasing the perils children are faced with. In addition, we believe that the following should also be provided well: a variety of protective mechanisms; experts of various professions who would primarily work in schools, but could also offer assistance outside the school community; all other rights of children. Promoting the culture of responsibility towards children is of utmost importance.

There are thousands of boys and girls who cannot expect adequate protection and help from their parents in the near future. In order to remedy this situation, actions should be taken on a world scale basis where all societies should join forces. This can be done through the various mechanisms the society has at its disposal: pre-school institutions, schools, other educational institutions, health care, social securities, laws, etc. If we succeed in creating a responsible society which will provide a healthful environment for children to grow up in, primarily through various national as well as international prevention and post-intervention networks for neglected and abused children, then we can say that we have succeeded in fulfilling some important children's rights. What is at stake here is not only the economic growth or social development, but morality.

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